

The Congressional Hearings Re The John F. Kennedy Assassination: The First Three Days

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Even an uninitiated observer at the first three days of hearings on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Sept. 8-10, 1978, could not help noticing a certain slant, bias, or attitude exhibited by the ten congressional members of the JFK Subcommittee who were present. Unlike the Martin Luther King, Jr., hearings of August, there is no living patsy that the committee can put on the stand and try to prosecute.

It was therefore necessary to create some straw men to shoot at and knock down. What better way to do it than to have two "representatives" of the "critics" summarize a number of issues that have been raised since 1964? and then parade a host of expert panelists from all over the U.S. to present evidence answering the questions in the general direction of "no conspiracy"?

The two representatives were Robert Groden, photographic "expert" and still a contract consultant to the committee, and Dr. Cyril Wecht, Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Coroner and long time critic of the Warren Commission report. Aside from former Texas Governor John Connally and Mrs. Nellie Connally, who appeared the first morning in a rather transparent effort to insure TV coverage, the rest of the witnesses for the three days were well rehearsed, and very cooperative witnesses for the committee. They were carefully led through their testimony, as in the prosecution half of the trial, by even more carefully rehearsed staff lawyers, supported by well prepared exhibits and charts. Groden was not disappointing in his evidence — but there is no way he could have possibly represented all researchers, or even all photographic researchers.

G. Robert Blakey and the committee should receive theatrical prizes for production and direction of the show, but a big fat zero for open-minded, objective investigation through interrogation of witnesses.

Perhaps we have seen only the "support the Warren Commission" side of this show. Some eternally optimistic researchers might still speculate that this part was a big farce, to lull the CIA and the FBI to sleep, before putting on the conspiracy barrage. If so, it was remarkably well done and well acted by everyone.

I am no longer placing much faith in Congressman Louis Stokes, or Congresswoman Yvonne Burke (who, by the way, missed the whole show). At this stage I would estimate the odds are about 1000 to 1 in favor

of continuing the coverup and producing the finding of no-conspiracy.

There were some good, even delightful moments. Cyril Wecht put on one of his very best performances in attacking the presentations of the other eight members of the medical panel, and also the committee, for supporting the single bullet theory. They obviously supported it. Of course, if you discard the single bullet theory, you automatically introduce conspiracy, which the committee does not want to do.

Wecht put the committee through some paces which had them struggling vainly to knock him down. Richardson Preyer, as logical and conservative a person as anyone could find, was actually caught saying, "Well, common sense tells us there could not have been a single bullet, but sometimes common sense fails us. For example, common sense tells us that the world is flat, but we know it is round."

Governor and Mrs. Connally gave extremely convincing testimony that makes the single bullet theory impossible. So did Wecht. Up to the end of the week, their testimony went virtually unanswered. The Connallys didn't say anything they hadn't said to the Warren Commission. They just said it with a lot more force and a lot more conviction, fourteen years later, and on public TV. They said the Governor was not hit by the first shot, which they both heard.

The medical panel unanimously presented some testimony which they no doubt did not realize, made it (1) impossible for the first shot to have come from the sixth floor window of the Texas School Book Depository, and (2) impossible for that bullet to have gone through JFK.

They testified, and Wecht agreed, that the entrance wound in JFK's back matched the coat and shirt holes, and that the position was from two inches to several inches below the position specified by the autopsy doctors. The hole is actually below the level of the neck wound if JFK's body is vertical.

Now the Zapruder film and the Willis and Betzner photos inform us that JFK was sitting upright at the time of the first shot (frame Z 189, according to my analysis, or even at frame Z 204, when he goes behind the Stemmons Freeway sign; the Warren Commission placed the shot at Z 210, 1/3 second later).

The medical panel's new finding means that if the first shot passed all the way through JFK, it would have had to originate at the street level somewhere on the north side of Elm Street. This is because Elm Street slopes downward. Even a horizontal trajectory backward along Elm would have originated at a point as high as JFK's back, still at street level (assuming JFK was vertical with respect to the street).

Since people lined Elm St. in a nearly solid mass all the way back to the corner of Elm and Houston, a shot (under this theory) could only have come from one of the people along the curb. Close examination of the Altgens photo, the Zapruder film, and the Weigman and Towner films show there was no one with a gun at the curb.

The first conclusion that can be drawn from this evidence, therefore, is that the first shot did not go through JFK and the trajectory of entrance was considerably higher than street level. This conclusion must be accompanied by a second conclusion, that the throat wound is an entrance wound.

The medical panel concluded, again with Wecht's agreement, that the throat wound was an exit wound. They reached this conclusion by examining the photos of the wound which was nearly obscured by the tracheotomy incision. There was one-half a hole protruding outside the incision. The condition of the skin in the area around this half-wound was taken to indicate exit, rather than entrance, of a bullet. The panel explained the smallness of the hole, 4 to 7 mm, by saying JFK's skin was taut because his collar and tie were tight.

No one on that panel evaluated what that wound might have looked like if it had not been a bullet wound. What skin remnants would be left if a flechette had entered JFK's throat? A flechette of 4 mm in diameter, made of a gelatinous substance capable of completely disappearing after entering the body, entering at a much slower speed than a rifle bullet, would undoubtedly leave a very different hole./1/

One can be sure that the committee will not investigate this possibility. They have not, and I predict they will not, investigate the CIA umbrella weapons systems developed at Fort Detrick, MD. Nor will they investigate the most probable candidate for the "umbrella man," a figure in the JFK assassination with CIA connections who surfaced during the Garrison investigation. They have had the name of this man and his photos compared to the umbrella man since last March. They have done nothing about contacting him, even though he is in a known jail in the South. Instead, it appears that the committee has created their own "umbrella man," someone from Dallas named Stephen Witt.

The coverup has now been extended to the committee. Exactly how we may never know. Was it Blakey? Or was the entire committee partially blackmailed or misled, or controlled, or some or all of them? Why didn't Yvonne Burke appear? If Richard A. Sprague were still there, or Congressman Henry Gonzalez, would it also have happened?

The coverup team now includes part or all of the Executive Branch, the U.S. Congress, the CIA, the FBI, and all of the major media. How does one deal

with that kind of competition?

/1/ For a realistic appraisal of the flechette, see "Gallery" magazine for June 1978, the article "The CIA Weapons System Used in the Assassination of President Kennedy," by R.E. Sprague and R.E. Cutler. □

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Times" about Lane's sex life. Blakey, obviously shaken by Lane's charges, which came on the eve of the hearings, called them "serious" and promised to investigate.

True or not, Lane's allegations, along with Blakey's own behavior, are bound to cast a pall on the hearings. Blakey has been counting on the hearings to go well, and weeks before they started, he reportedly was calling the executives of the various television networks, urging them to provide coverage. It is his moment in the spotlight, and he has rehearsed it carefully. A lot is riding on these hearings for G. Robert Blakey. More than one source who has come in contact with him lately gets the impression that, when the investigation is wrapped up, he would very much like a senior job in the Justice Department. A good performance could be a stepping stone.

What the hearings will do for the establishment of truth is something else. So poisoned has the atmosphere become from months of bitterness that whatever conclusions the committee comes up with will be suspect. And that is sad — for whatever its sins and omissions, the committee's field investigators have uncovered much that was never known about both murders. One source talks wistfully about "dozens of leads" into a possible conspiracy to kill Kennedy — leads which, like so much about the Kennedy and King murders, may now go aglimmering. □

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I was afraid something very nasty would happen to me before the article was published. But when the issue of the magazine came off the press, and had been distributed widely, publication had been achieved. I was relieved that I was still alive, and I felt safe again as a result of the publication. The only extraordinary thing that happened was that a shipment of 1000 copies of the May, 1970, issue directed to the Joint Computer Conference and Exhibit in Atlantic City, N.J., where we had a booth, vanished into thin air. So we were unable to distribute our magazine at our booth there.

Evidently, I have still done nothing important enough to arrive on the list of "persons to be liquidated," like De Morenschildt and Donovan.

The current hearings may become an integrated set of stupidities, like the Warren Commission Report. But the American people are no longer able to swallow the guff they used to. The Watergate affair and the "impeachment" of Richard M. Nixon have produced lessons. And the coming dark ages for the United States (lack of oil, continuing inflation, the likelihood of nuclear war, etc.) will produce new teachable moments in the United States. And these forthcoming evil events will drive home the betrayal of the people of the United States by the military-industrial-labor complex and the Power Control Group. □

then, the press had been barred as well, since, in one of his first official acts, Blakey had closed the press office. Even the aides of the members of the committee were cut off from reviewing the progress of the investigation. So great was Blakey's compulsion for secrecy that he ordered copies of the contracts of all consultants withheld from the House Administration Committee — a move virtually unprecedented in congressional history.

By contrast, Blakey was oddly trusting of the FBI and the CIA, agencies which, in the minds of many, are themselves under suspicion. Dismissing such concerns, and a preliminary report of the committee (which had questioned both the CIA's and the FBI's handling of the Kennedy case), Blakey established a cozy relationship with the Bureau and the Agency. Before examining any classified CIA files, committee investigators had to sign a CIA secrecy oath similar to that signed by agency critic Frank Snepp and all other CIA personnel. Any notes made from CIA documents were subject to agency clearance. And, in a burst of startling beneficence, Blakey agreed to let the CIA review the final report of the committee before it was released to Congress and the public. Blakey's all-too-willing accession to intelligence procedure flabbergasted his own staff and others familiar with the committee's work, among them Richard Sprague. Asked Sprague: "What's the point of getting material in the first place, if they are going to control who sees it and what we can do with it?" In return for the committee's cooperation, the intelligence agencies promised unlimited access to their files, but have continued to stall and on at least one occasion, the CIA was caught lying about the existence of files.

What troubled investigators far more, though, was Blakey's dogged narrowing of the focus of their probing. Soon after his arrival, Blakey lectured the assembled staff on the importance of limiting objectives and later divided them into five separate task forces, with sharply defined areas of responsibility. Where once Sprague had talked of an "open-ended investigation" lasting five years or more, Blakey now instructed his people to have their case wrapped up by the end of the year. Those who quarreled with the new direction of the investigation soon found themselves unemployed. One of the first to go was Kevin Walsh, a researcher, and uncommon among the staff in that he had actually studied the Kennedy case before being hired. But Walsh was known to have friends among Warren Commission critics, and, within a few months, Blakey requested his resignation for what was termed "poor work habits." Donovan Gay, the committee's chief of research, was squeezed out following a series of disagreements with Blakey and the gradual diminution of his access to classified documents. Another researcher, Colleen Boland, was fired without explanation. She promptly sued the committee, and, in an ironic turnabout, retained as counsel two of Blakey's predecessors, Richard Sprague and Alvin Lewis. And, within the past six weeks, Blakey himself has discharged 28 staffers — 24 of them investigators — on grounds that the committee was running out of money. Blakey would be in a position to know. Last February, he returned \$425,000 of the committee's budget to Congress, saying that the funds were not needed.

By far the most explosive departure, though — and the one which says the most about the committee's workings — was the resignation of Robert J. Lehner.

Lehner, a former Manhattan district attorney and chief deputy counsel in charge of the King investigation, had, during the brief regime of Richard Sprague, developed a good working relationship with James Earl Ray, and was pursuing a number of leads Ray and others had provided him. Certainly, there were leads aplenty in the killing of Martin Luther King. Who, if anyone, was the mysterious "Raoul" who Ray claimed had framed him? What was the source of Ray's apparently limitless funding? How did he manage to come by forged passports and identity papers? Why had the Memphis police department "stripped" King of protection shortly before his assassination? To what lengths was the FBI willing to go to "get" King? It was these and many other questions that Lehner and his task force were trying to answer — to the considerable discomfort of G. Robert Blakey. According to committee sources, Blakey insisted on a far narrower and neater inquiry, limited essentially to James Earl Ray, the members of his immediate family, and J.B. Stoner, head of the racist National States Rights Party. A confrontation ensued. Ultimately, Lehner took his case to the full committee, which proceeded to split into two opposing factions. Black congressional support, which might have been expected for Lehner, mysteriously failed to materialize, even as rumors circulated of FBI tapes which, if disclosed, would prove embarrassing to several of King's former key associates. In any event, Blakey carried the day by issuing a "him or me" ultimatum. At that point, Lehner stepped aside. "The committee would never have survived if Blakey quit," one congressional aide said later. "You've got to remember this committee is walking on egg shells."

Lehner's resignation brought a major shift of focus in the King investigation. Ray, who had been cooperating, suddenly turned sullen. His family began to feel pressure from Blakey. Their financial records were subpoenaed, and Ray's brothers and sisters soon felt more like suspects than witnesses. Citing possible conflict of interest, the committee refused to allow Jerry Ray to retain Mark Lane (who is also representing James Earl) as counsel, at the same time ominously warning Jerry that he would be wise to secure another lawyer. (He eventually represented himself.) Ray's sister, Carol Pepper, was likewise refused permission to retain the lawyer of her choice, Jim Lesar, a specialist on the King case who had once represented James Earl. (She managed to keep him only after the committee backed away from a showdown.) The committee refused requests by the Ray brothers and Carol Pepper that their testimony be taken in open session, and shortly after his closed-door testimony, John Ray found himself back behind bars, his parole revoked at the request of Blakey, who had accused him of possible perjury.

But the most self-destructive strategem allegedly involved subornation of perjury, receipt of stolen property and the monitoring and tape-recording of phone calls by an undercover agent, reportedly in the employ of the committee.

The agent's name was Oliver Patterson, a self-identified former informer for the FBI. According to Mark Lane, Patterson, along with committee investigators "and their agents," stole copies of letters between the Ray brothers, monitored and tape-recorded telephone conversations with them, and, in one particularly sleazy bit of business, were instructed to disclose scurrilous information to the "New York

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